DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 327 CS 201 687

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TITLE Communication: A View from the Inside of Business.
INSTITUTION American Business Communication Association, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE 74
NOTE 10p.
JOURNAL CIT Journal of Business Communication; v11 n4 p53-59 Summer 1974

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Business Correspondence; *Business Skills; *Communication Skills; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *National Surveys; *Organizational Communication; Personnel Directors

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to determine the importance business places on effective communication and to see if there is a need for communication courses at the graduate level. The personnel officers of 250 large organizations were surveyed concerning their attitudes about the need for such courses. It was found that communication skills were rated of extreme importance by executives of large organizations, some believing it to be the single most important function of management personnel. (RB)

ED101327

THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION
VOLUME 11 NUMBER 4
SUMMER, 1974

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THE FIRST FOUR ARTICLES in this issue provide a survey of the history and development of administrative communication. They were presented to the special interest group in organizational communication at the national meeting of the Academy of Management at Boston, August, 1973.

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The Journal of Business Communication is published four times each year (Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer) by the American Business Communication Association, 317-B David Kinley Hall, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801. Regular memberships: $15; sustaining memberships: $25 ($12 of dues is for a year's subscription — four issues — to *The Journal of Business Communication*). There is a special membership fee of $7 for *full-time* students.

Library subscription rate: $15. Single copies: $3.75.

Second-class postage paid at Urbana, Illinois.

The editors welcome manuscripts. Particularly sought are articles on research results, theoretical or philosophical approaches to business communication, and techniques of wide applicability; but all manuscripts will be considered for publication. *The Journal of Business Communication* is a refereed journal. Manuscripts will be read by the board of editors. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced. Each author is responsible for the accuracy of his documentation. Notes and references should be gathered at the end of an article. Style of documentation may follow that of the *MLA Style Sheet* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The authors undertook a survey of the attitudes of personnel officers of 250 large organizations concerning the need for communication courses at the graduate level. The survey found that communication skills were rated of extreme importance by executives of large organizations, some believing it to be the single most important function of management personnel.

COMMUNICATION: A View from the Inside of Business

JAMES A. BELOHLOV, PAUL O. POPP,
and MICHAEL S. PORTE
University of Cincinnati

"GOOD COMMUNICATION HAS BEEN a defect among man and woman since the beginning of time and little seems to be accomplished... Why?" This comment from one respondent to our survey illustrates the fact that we must continually emphasize the need for effective communication at all levels of our daily lives. This need also extends beyond our private life into our major industrial and governmental organizations. In these vast systems, weaknesses in the complex interdependent communication processes are quickly recognized. To reduce the negative effect of such weaknesses, the organization can (1) initiate training programs in communication skills for its personnel, and (2) require that new personnel have specified minimum communication skills upon entering the system. In response to the second option, many colleges and universities have attempted to incorporate the study of communication processes into their functional disciplines. This survey has provided contemporary business organizations the opportunity to express their views as to the value and need for communication courses established at the graduate level.

METHOD

The population surveyed was comprised of the largest organizations within the private sector of the United States economy. The sample selected was drawn from the May 1972 issue of *Fortune* magazine and included:

100 largest industrial (based on reported sales)
25 largest commercial banks (based on sales and profits)
25 largest retailing firms (based on assets)
25 largest transportation firms (based on operating revenue)
25 largest life insurance firms (based on reported assets)
25 largest diversified financial firms (based on assets)
25 largest public utilities (based on assets)

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The personnel officers of the sample of 250 organizations were mailed an introductory cover letter, a sixteen item questionnaire and a postage pre-paid return mail envelope. Although names, titles and other identification of the firm responding was requested, anonymity was guaranteed if so desired. Of the 250 organizations contacted, 84 (33.7%) returned useable questionnaires. The responses to the questionnaire items were then interpreted using descriptive statistics and one-way frequency distributions. (See N. H. Nie, D. H. Bent and C. H. Hull, *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1970.)

Questionnaire Format

As noted earlier, the questionnaire design consisted of sixteen questions. The first fifteen were divided into four categories and are identified as follows:

Group I: Importance of communication skills

Group II: The value of proficiency in various communication skills

Group III: Communications as related to success within the organization, and

Group IV: The importance of communication skills in the recruiting and selection of new employees

In addition, the responses to question 16, "If you could ask a question of a business communication professor, what would it be?" were analyzed and placed into four general question areas.

Results

Group I: Questionnaire items 1 through 3 provide input to determine the relative value of general business communication skills developed at the graduate level to the organization.

Item 1: Do you think a business communication course should be a requirement in a graduate program?

Yes 90.5% (n=76)
No 8.3% (n= 8)

Item 2: Do you think a business communication course provides practical skills that can be used in your company?

Yes 96.4% (n=81)
No 3.6% (n= 3)

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Item 3: Do you think it would be useful for an executive to take a graduate course in communication?

Yes 92.9% (n=78)
No 7.1% (n= 6)

Group II: Questionnaire items 4 through 6 provide input to determine the organization's perception of the value assigned to various skill elements within the communication process. For the purpose of brevity, these skills were limited to: (1) oral, (2) written, and (3) non-verbal. Each of these elements is considered to be enhanced or refined at the graduate level in business communications.

Item 4: What skills do you expect in an individual taking a graduate course in business communication?

Oral (speaking, discussion) 92% (n=77) said yes
Written (reports, letters) 88% (n=74) said yes
Non-verbal (listening) 88% (n=74) said yes

Item 5: What skills do you think an executive should have in communications that you have found do not generally come from a course in business communication?

Oral 36% (n=30) found this element lacking
Written 19% (n=16) found this element lacking
Non-verbal 60% (n=50) found this element lacking

Item 6: If you were designing a course in business communications indicate the percent of time you would devote to each area.

Oral 36% of the time to this area on the avg.
Written 34% of the time to this area on the avg.
Non-verbal 27% of the time to this area on the avg.

(Note: For the Oral and Written the time estimates ranged from 0 to 70% with the mode at 40% for each. In the Non-verbal the range was from 0 to 90% with the mode at 20%.)

Group III: Questionnaire items 7 through 9 and 14 and 15 provide input to determine the relative contribution of communication skills to the organization's employee retention and promotion system. Of particular interest was the impact of the lack of such skills in minority and foreign-born employees. Because direct questioning of respondents in this sensitive area is difficult, we use items 8 and 9 to indicate organization concern in this area.

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Item 7: In assessing a woman or man's chance of success in your company, how important do you think communication skills are, relative to other kinds of abilities?

Very Important 85.7% (n=72) responded affirmatively

Somewhat Important 14.3% (n=12)

No Importance None responded here

Item: 8: Do minority or foreign employees lack certain skills you require as measuring up to your typical job description standards?

Yes 64.3% (n=54)

No 35.7% (n=30)

Item 9: Do your employees attend training projects that improve communication skills?

Twice a year: 2.4% (n= 2)

Once a year: 8.3% (n= 7)

On occasion: 79.8% (n=67)

Never: 8.3% (n= 7)

Item 14: Do communication skills count for anything when you hire employees?

Yes 95.2% (n=80)

No 4.8% (n= 4)

Item 15: Can you determine the value weight assigned to such a variable?

Yes 26.2% (n=22)

No 73.8% (n=65)

% Average 8.3% (range 0 to 75%

Group IV: Questionnaire item numbers 10 through 13 provided input to determine the relative value of communication skills in the recruitment process of the organization.

Item 10: Do you think that business communication courses should teach students to write an application letter and resumé?

Yes 70.2% (n=59)

No 29.8% (n=25)

Item 11: Do you think that business communication courses should teach students to write an unsolicited letter following his interview?

Yes 57.1% (n=48)

No 42.9% (n=14)

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Item 12: Does your firm actively recruit professional employees from college campuses?

Yes	83.3%	(n=70)
No	16.7%	(n=14)

Item 13: If yes, approximate number each year.

1 - 10:	40.5%	(n=34)
11 - 25:	17.9%	(n=15)
26 - 50:	14.3%	(n=12)
50 or more:	16.7%	(n=14)

Question 16

Thirty-eight of the firms surveyed responded to question 16. Because space limitation prohibits a census of these comments, we arbitrarily placed some of them into the four general categories as food for thought.

(A) Questions about the quality and frequency of university faculty/organization interface.

"Why don't you spend more time in industry in order to become better acquainted with the problem?"

"How well do you know . . .

a) what is communicated in industry?

b) the 'chain of communication' in industry?"

"How often do you get out into the Business World and ask how you might better meet the needs of Industry through the classroom?"

"Why don't you give your students a little more realistic view of business communications and what it involves?"

"How do you know what you teach is of value to the student and his career?"

(B) Questions regarding the design of a Business Communication Course.

"What would your objective be in specific terms?"

"How do you evaluate a communication course?"

"What's your objective with this program in terms of terminal behavior?"

"Why aren't students required to make more oral presentations?"

"How do you measure student learning on oral and non-verbal communications?"

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(C) Questions regarding the communication skills of minority and foreign-born employees.

"Is any special emphasis being made to improve communication skills for minorities?"

"How can a business communication course be developed to include an understanding of the different minority 'languages' and colloquialisms that cause misunderstandings?"

(D) Questions regarding non-verbal skill development.

"What techniques can be used to emphasize the importance of listening on the part of the first line supervisor?"

"How can listening be a 'non-verbal' skill in the context of Business Communications? Why was reading left out?"

"What are the best ways to insure listening skills are developed to some degree of efficiency as are oral and written communication skills?"

"How much value do you place on non-verbal business communications?"

"What is the most effective way to teach and have accepted the need for supervisors and professional employees to listen?"

Summary and Conclusions

"Of all the principles of supervisory management, communications is the most important and should be featured at all levels. In today's business world there is really no valid excuse for lack of communications or poor communications, but there are such things as the facts of life and we know that the need is most apparent." Although this statement from one of the respondents is "one man's opinion," we feel this study indicates he is representative of the current concern for communication effectiveness in organizations today. One simple indicator to support this contention is the relatively large number of respondents to our survey. Another is that respondents nearly unanimously agree that communications courses can provide skills that will have utility to the individual and to the organization he represents. Further, over 92% of those responding felt that it would be beneficial for an executive to take a communications course at the graduate level.

We can also conclude that industry in general expects proficiency in all aspects of communication (oral, written and non-verbal) from the individual that has taken graduate-level communications courses. However, sixty percent of those surveyed believe that communica-

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tions courses as presently designed do not provide the student with enough improvement in the non-verbal skill area relative to the improvements recognized in the oral and written communication skills.

With over eighty percent of the firms recruiting 1 to 10 individuals from college campuses each year, the need to identify the relative value of communications skills in the recruitment and selection process is apparent. Furthermore, the study indicates that these skills are critically important to later success within the organization. But, as before, although the need is recognized, little is done by the firm in the formal sense to provide continuing training for employees after selection.

Finally, while companies think that business communication courses should teach letter and resumé writing, a large percentage feel that the writing of unsolicited follow-up letters by the job candidate is not essential.

Recommendations

The need to augment and improve communication systems is a problem of major significance being encountered in contemporary business organizations. Educators must place a high priority on making available to business the largely untapped resources available in the colleges and universities. Conversely, the organizations must take the steps necessary to uncover and identify areas in which they possess limited capability for improvement. Once this has been done, pro-active measures can be developed on a mutually beneficial basis. In order to facilitate this synthesis of need and resource we recommend the following:

1. Actively identify and define current communication related problem areas in organizations.
2. Mobilize university resources to provide problem-solving oriented communication programs and seminars at all management levels in Business Organizations.
3. Initiate courses at the graduate level that (1) actively seek solutions to the identified communication problems, and (2) provide the students with workable knowledge of the communication process.